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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

## Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: March 2, 1979

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SUBJECT: Current Argentine Developments

IAHCR + ?

AX 036

PARTICIPANTS: Colonel (Auditor) Carlos Cerda, Office of the  
Presidencia  
Maxwell Chaplin, Deputy Chief of Mission, Buenos Aires

I invited Colonel Cerda to my residence to lunch to follow up on a variety of topics, particularly the visit of the IAHCR to Argentina.

IAHCR Visit

Following up on the Ambassador's talk with General Viola reported in Buenos Aires 1614, I asked Cerda if the work of the Committee dealing with the Commission's visit will be made public. The question stunned him slightly -- apparently the existence of the Committee is not widely acknowledged -- and he said firmly that its work will be kept private. He said the GOA was not going to take any action which would heighten public expectations or tensions about the Commission's visit. "We don't want thousands of people with signs in the Plaza de Mayo or the newspapers filled with advertisements." If there were great public expectations about the visit it would make the government's task (presumably with recalcitrant military) more difficult. He confirmed that Minister Arlfa in the Foreign Office would have nothing to do with the visit.

He said the GOA was pleased that the visit would be led by the Commission's President, Andres Aguilar, with whom Cerda negotiated the visit's terms in August 1978. Cerda, who obviously has a high personal opinion of Aguilar, said that they were worried that he might be named to a high position in the new Venezuelan Government, perhaps as Foreign Minister but that this had not happened and they were much reassured that he would be coming. He said the GOA was making one more effort to confer with Aguilar before the visit and he said he thought he might also consider talking with the U.S. member of the Commission.

DCM: MChaplin *Mc*  
(Drafting Office and Officer)

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What?

When I probed as to the origin of the invitation to the Commission, observing that it appeared from our records to have been raised first by President Videla with Undersecretary Newsom, Cerda came on strong with the party line that of course it had been Videla's idea and his initiative. He said that Videla had viewed the Commission as a way to help with the objective of rebuilding our poor foreign image, and had so presented the proposed visit to his military colleagues who were almost unanimously opposed. He repeated with some indignation the story of the Foreign Office's betrayal of President Videla by adding to the original note of invitation a sentence which contained conditions which were known to be unacceptable to the Commission. (Comment: While Cerda's protest that all the credit should go to Videla had the ring of sincerity, I suspect Cerda had more than a little to do with it. Since it is not a universally popular proposal, he may deny paternity simply in the interest of his personal security.)

Cerda said that the Palace was working on some things which would respond to the concerns of the families of the disappeared. The only specific I could draw from him was that the laws dealing with presumption of death would be amended to shorten the waiting period.

#### Labor Law

Cerda did not appear to want to get into the details of the labor law so I did not press him. He confirmed that there would in fact be a law after three years during which the three services have been unable to agree on this subject. He seemed to feel considerable satisfaction that it had finally been possible to get agreement on such a divisive issue and this by itself was a significant forward step. He digressed by talking about the political position of the military and stressed that it is not identified with any particular class -- as is the Navy in Chile, for example -- nor does it identify with any particular economic grouping. Therefore, he said it does not merit an anti-labor image and the GOA must move ahead rapidly to reassure labor that the military is not dedicated to its destruction. While on this topic he made

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favorable references to the political genius of General Viola who was described as a politician of both high ideals and great flexibility.

A Return to Normalcy

I told we had heard a lot about return to normalcy but it seemed to me the GOA had a long way to go when disappearances in 1978 averaged almost 50 per month. In the past Cerda has refused to be drawn into a discussion of the specifics of the human rights problem but this time he responded with considerable vigor and confidence that the situation was rapidly being brought under control and "disappearances are going to stop." He asked if it were not true that disappearances had declined sharply in the past three months and I responded while this might be the case it was still too early to tell. He returned to his theme with renewed force and said that things are definitely going to get better. He said the situation is in hand and we are going to carry out our program. (In a later part of the conversation he mentioned that it would be inconceivable to have disappearances taking place when the IAHCR was visiting.)

Comment: Cerda's cautious, conservative views were the same as he has displayed before. He is blossoming a little with the increased authority he apparently has in the Casa Rosada but he volunteered little more than platitudes. I was impressed by some indications that he apparently has some major responsibilities in the Casa Rosada which go beyond legal technicalities. It was noteworthy that while he has been leery of being drawn into discussion of human rights in the past, on this occasion he was remarkably confident and forthright that the situation would be promptly brought under control. There seems little reason for him to have gone out on this limb without some grounds for believing it may turn out to be true. He is simply too cautious to try to sell a story lacking any basis whatsoever.

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